

‘I applaud Roy Millar’s endeavours to guide us through one of the most profound books of the Bible. His commentary painstakingly and soundly examines the text section by section and the result is impressive.’

Dr R T Kendall, Bible Teacher and Author; formerly Minister, Westminster Chapel, London

‘*Come and See* gave me many new and precious insights into John’s unique Gospel. Roy’s excellent book is theologically faithful and thought-provoking – an invaluable guide to anyone seeking to understand and enjoy this profound Gospel.’

Reverend Lyndon Bowring, Chairman, CARE

‘Dr Roy Millar has been a follower of Jesus for many years and has sent much time in study of His Word. *Come and See* is the fruit of a gifted teacher’s sustained meditation and careful exposition on John’s gospel. Staying faithful to the text, with a deep grasp of first-century Jewish context, Jesus and His teaching is vividly presented to us. Whether you are a seasoned scholar, a growing follower or even a new enquirer, this rich study will help you “come and see” and meet and know, Jesus the Messiah.’

Simon Ponsonby - Teaching Pastor St Aldates Church, Oxford, and Author

‘It is hard to believe that this is Roy Millar’s first book. Not only is it beautifully written in clear, lucid prose, it is amazingly perceptive from beginning to end. In chapter nine, speaking about his methodology, Roy says, “We need to read forwards from the Hebrew roots of the Bible and from the standpoint of those who heard the words in their original context.” So like modern-day, Messianic Jews, this is exactly what the author does in a knowledgeable and perceptive way. I can honestly say that rarely have I read a book on Scripture which displays such a profound spiritual understanding of the meaning and implications of God’s word. It is a veritable tour de force and I wholeheartedly recommend it to all who wish to know Jesus better, including fellow-Catholics.’

Pat Collins CM, MA, STL Evangelist, Scholar and Author

‘In this book, Roy Millar shares some of the fruit of a lifetime’s immersion in the Scriptures: reading them, studying them, praying them and living them. His writing weaves together rich background context and grounded insight on what it is to be human, offered together as a very accessible narrative commentary, unfolding in line with the Gospel itself. Roy’s book will be of benefit not only to those who preach and help others to learn, but also to all who are looking for an accessible way to deepen their Biblical understanding and Christian faith. It enabled me to read familiar passages in a new and life-giving light. It will help all readers to *Come and See* in a fresh and deeper way the grace and generosity of God.’

(Revd Canon Dr) Jonathan Kimber, Director of Ministry and Discipleship, Diocese of Worcester

‘The Word having been made flesh continues to be made fresh in these pages. Like a well-matured wine, this book is to be savoured. Chapter by chapter it lends itself to weekly tastings. As the French have crystallised the concept of “terroir” in describing the distinctives of a particular wine, so Roy Millar helps us discern the unique aspects of the Fourth Gospel. He demonstrates a particular sensitivity to the Jewish matrix out of which John shaped his material and uses this to lead his readers into a deeper understanding of Jesus, God’s Word in and to the world.’

Desmond Maxwell, Founder and Director of Xplorations Teaching Ministry

‘Some ideas come via information, but transformational truth comes by revelation. Through the invitation to “come and see”, the author not only invites us into the deep waters of John’s magnificent Gospel, but he also reveals something of the depth of his own soul. In these pages you will feel his passion for Jesus through his love and reverence of the text, and I pray you too will catch the life-changing power of his message. If you love the Lord and His Word, this book will serve to encourage and enrich your relationship with both.’

Dr John Andrews, Leader, Teacher and Author

‘Roy Millar’s new book, *Come and See*, makes Jesus, John and the whole New Testament landscape come alive for twenty-first-century readers. Theologically astute and yet also devotionally apt and eminently readable, this mini-commentary serves as a veritable roadmap to John’s Gospel, and to Jesus Himself as its subject, within its historical, canonical and spiritual life context. Jesus as divine, Jesus as truly Jewish, Jesus as the One who meets us in unexpected ways... and then never lets us remain the same: all are here, in the mystery of this Man unlike any other!

‘I can think of no better introduction to Jesus for seekers and mature believers alike!’

Rev Lance Wonders, DPhil, DMin, Academic Dean, ACTS International Bible College, Blaine, Minnesota, USA

‘Having known Roy Millar for 25 years it was a delight to use his commentary on John’s Gospel for my daily devotions. It reflected his own depth of scriptural knowledge by providing both wonderful insights into the text and practical encouragement for daily living. It is accessible to the youngest Christian and at the same time draws more seasoned believers into fresh revelation and personal dedication to Christ. I used it on a daily basis but it would be great for a small group to work through. I thoroughly commend it to you.’

Paul Reid, Pastor Emeritus, Christian Fellowship Church, Belfast

‘Roy has been a personal friend for a number of years and I have seen his desire to help people to have a clearer understanding of God’s Word, in a way that leads to a deeper relationship with Him. *Come and See* is a particular example of this, illuminating the Gospel of John like a floodlight and revealing the mysteries of God and of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, and inviting readers to follow Him as disciples. I recommend it to everyone but especially to my brothers and sisters from a Muslim background, both those who currently believe in Jesus and also those who are willing to investigate His claims to be the Messiah and the Son of God.’

Davood Mahmoodi, Pastor Iranian Ministry Ireland

‘Roy Millar has provided us with a thoughtful and accessible narrative commentary on John’s Gospel. He has, as it were, taken us by the hand to “come and see” the Jesus whom John wants us to see. The narrative takes us to creation and incarnation, to historically significant locations and to the deepening and disturbingly sharp conflict between Jesus and the pervasively influential, non-relational, legalistic and dedicated religious establishment and then to self-interested political power, to the cross, death, burial and resurrection.

John’s Gospel finds its origin in God’s generous love for the world. In contrast to the world’s darkness, Jesus, the Light of the world, came among us, was one of us, triumphed with cosmic significance and still shines brightly. Here is John’s good news about Jesus for people everywhere to believe.’

Rev John Dunlop, Minister Emeritus, Rosemary Presbyterian Church, Belfast; formerly Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland

‘A number of features mark this commentary as a very useful resource for those seeking to understand the Gospel of John. On a practical level, it is useful to have the biblical text of the Gospel included in the publication. However, it is the content of the commentary that makes a particularly valuable contribution. The Introduction: the Journey, is a concise overview of the message of the Gospel and is a helpful foundation on which the main commentary builds and develops. Connections between the Gospel and the Old Testament are highlighted and the key words and themes such as “authority” are clearly explicated. Aspects of Jewish culture and practice that shed light on the Gospel are also explored and explained. Moreover, the commentary is not just a historical study of an ancient text but it also emphasises the relevance and importance of this powerful message for today. Overall, this is an insightful and thought-provoking commentary that will be a useful addition to any Christian’s library.’

Dr James McKeown, Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and member of the Board of the Institute of Theology, Queen’s University Belfast

'Come and See is a clear, careful and comprehensive exposition of John's Gospel. It contains many original and helpful insights into the life and work of Jesus. It is particularly strong in seeing Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures and in setting His ministry in its original Jewish context. All Christians, young and old, will benefit from it, and the serious enquirer will discover who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him. I am delighted to be able to recommend this book.'

Pastor Leslie Hutchinson, former President of the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland; Lecturer in Ethics at the Irish Baptist College

'There is an exciting renaissance in biblical studies, yielding blessing after blessing for disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. The simple but profound truth that our Christian roots run deep into the soil of Hebrew language and culture nourishes every area of faith and practice. Roy Millar draws on the best of this scholarship to help paint, from John's context, a portrait of the Jewish Messiah in continuity with Israel's prophetic history and God's redemptive purposes in the world. The startling result helps us recapture the sense of awe in the inspired invitation, "come and see".'

'Roy's writing displays the clarity of a scholar, the passion of a shepherd, and the skill of an artist. These gifts work in harmony to accomplish the author's goal of offering you, the reader, a fresh invitation to intimacy with your great Creator. I invite you to read this book.'

James Whitman, President, Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, Dayton Ohio

COME AND SEE

An invitation to journey with Jesus and His
beloved disciple John

Roy Millar

instant
apostle

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Dedicated to my wife Rosemary

and to

Sarah

Matthew

Chloe

Annabel

Katie

Lucas

Barney

Seven young disciples

To my dear friends Peter and Sharon Yarr, whose steadfast faith, in the midst of extreme circumstances, has demonstrated what it means to truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

These [things] are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

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AUTHOR NOTE

All profits from this book will be used to support Kiwoko Hospital in rural Uganda:

Kiwoko Hospital had its origin about thirty years ago, in the aftermath of a civil war that left the district devastated and without medical help of any kind. It now has 200+ beds and provides a high standard of medical care to a community of mostly poor people. External support is still required in order to maintain its work of healing and Christian mission.

For further information about Kiwoko Hospital please visit: <http://www.fokh.org.uk/>

Free audio and written Bible study material by Roy Millar is available at: www.treeoflifebiblestudies.org/

‘Wisdom...is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her.’ (Proverbs 3:13, 18)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this book I have chosen to draw on material that has accumulated in my mind over the course of many years. Some of this has its origins in the insights of others, gleaned from oral presentations on different occasions, and I now gratefully acknowledge those whose input I can currently identify. Chief among these is Professor David W Gooding who showed me how to recognise the literary structure of a sacred text and thus to better understand it from the author's point of view. He pointed out how various events at the wedding in Cana of Galilee had important symbolic significance. He explained how two other miracle-signs revealed Jesus as Lord of space and time, and also how His power to raise the dead prefigured the ultimate renewal of the whole creation. He also highlighted the clash of two kingdoms, based alternately on truth and power, as revealed in the encounter between Jesus and Pilate.

Barry Kissell provided an important insight when, speaking about Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, he pointed out that Jesus was being guided by His Father in a moment-by-moment way, rather than following an agenda. I then realised that this dynamic applied to all the other events of Jesus' life. My good friend Alan George suggested an alternative understanding of the background of the Samaritan woman, and I have incorporated this into my discussion of this incident.

I am also grateful to the late Dr Dwight A Pryor for drawing my attention to the fact that, consistently throughout John's Gospel, water functions as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, and for explaining how the Pharisee Nicodemus would have reacted to Jesus' teaching about new birth.

On several occasions, Leon Morris' discussions of difficult points of exegesis were very helpful.¹

I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of a number of friends in bringing this book to its final form. Ian Taylor designed the initial format of the text and spent very many hours restoring it on the numerous occasions when technical difficulties occurred. Richard Kimber acted as critical reader of the text, clarifying expressions and making necessary amendments, helping me to discard superfluous material and challenging my ideas, and his expertise on the Greek text has been invaluable. Such virtues as the book possesses owe much to Ian's and Richard's honest and kindly critiques, and to Jonathan Kimber's robust and kindly criticism which resulted in a major rewrite of the text. Other friends, including Jim and Pamela Ferguson, Anne Flynn and Eugene Boyle, also read the text, correcting errors, offering encouragement and making suggestions, and I am most grateful to all of them. I am also grateful for the professional input and personal encouragement of the Instant Apostle team and, in particular, for the patient and insightful work of Nicki Copeland, the editor.

It is usual at this point to express thanks to one's spouse. I do so, not as a matter of routine, but because of the immense amount of encouragement that I received from my wife Rosemary during almost three years it took to complete writing the book, including times when progress was slow or stationary. Without her love and patience the process of climbing this particular mountain would have been much more daunting.

All Bible references are from the World English Bible British English (WEBBE). This version is in the public domain, which makes it possible to include the whole text of John's Gospel within the text of the book. The WEBBE is an updated and thoroughly modernised version of the 1901 American Standard Version..

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1995).

PREFACE

John's Gospel has a unique place in my affections. When I was a young Christian, seeking a more personal knowledge of God, He responded to my prayer in a very dramatic and immediate way. Soon after this I began to read John's Gospel and, although I already knew much of the content, it was like a new book. The person of Jesus emerged in a fresh and vivid way and I also discovered the reality of God as my Father. This book, entitled *Come and See*, is the product of much reflection during several decades, augmented with insights from many sources.

'Come and see' was how Jesus invited Andrew and John, His first two followers, to join Him on a journey that would lead to increasing intimacy with Him. This invitation was extended, implicitly or explicitly, to many other people during the following two to three years and was met with very different responses. Some realised that Jesus was the Messiah whom they had been seeking and joined Him on His journey as disciples. Others were taken by surprise but gladly recognised that He was the answer to the situations in which they were trapped. Another group had vested interests in denying Jesus' identity and turned against Him in anger and fear. As we follow the journey of Jesus through John's eyes we are confronted with the same challenge, for there is ultimately no neutral position.

Jesus also received the invitation to 'come and see' the tomb of Lazarus, His friend. It was a moment of deep emotion, for it was a place of death and corruption and despair that encapsulated the condition of the broken creation. It also portrayed the imminent events of His own crucifixion and resurrection.

I have had the opportunity to teach extended courses on this Gospel, initially in a midweek class at Christian Fellowship Church, Belfast, and then with a group of young Christians. These experiences, together with teaching many other study groups, have convinced me that many Christians have a desire for a deeper

engagement with the Word of God than is possible in the context of Sunday services where many items compete for limited time. The option of Bible or theological college courses is impracticable for many people, and they may find it difficult to identify suitable written material in the space between popular devotional books and academic commentaries whose style and intricacy of content may be intimidating.

It is with such people in mind that I have written this book. I have provided a detailed exegesis of each part of the text, without the use of technical language. I have also explained the thought flow of the Gospel as a whole and how it connects with the rest of Scripture, so those engaged in theological studies may also find useful insights. Where appropriate, I have made connections and applications for us in our current world situation. The book could therefore also be relevant to Jews and Muslims, an increasing number of whom are becoming open to study the life of Jesus of Nazareth. His claim to be the Son of God is contradicted by their strict interpretations of monotheism, as was also the case for the Pharisees during Jesus' lifetime. Perhaps they may be helped to see that Jesus is the revelation of the Father, emphasising rather than diminishing the glory of the one true God.

John's world also contained sceptics and pagans. The Sadducees, although dressed in religious clothing and performing associated rituals, were the sceptics of their day. They did not believe in the supernatural world, denied Jesus' claims to have come from another world, discounted the evidence that He provided, and were determined to silence Him one way or another. Modern sceptics, dressed in scientific clothing, often do the same.

Pontius Pilate was a pagan who believed in many gods, also not unusual in our contemporary world. He was disconcerted in the presence of Jesus, who was claiming to be the representative of absolute truth.

Perhaps some members of these two groups, if willing to reconsider their positions, would also find direction to the One who is the way and the truth and the life, as a result of understanding John's account of the life of Jesus.

The portion of the Gospel text being considered is included within each chapter of the book, so that it can be read without the

need to refer to a separate Bible text. This should facilitate reading in situations where this would be inconvenient or impossible; the book is designed to be read initially as a narrative rather than as an intensive study. Individual chapters were deliberately kept short in order to facilitate a daily-reading programme.

The finished text turned out to have fifty-two chapters. An initial reading through the book could be followed by more detailed study during the course of a year, making use of the many biblical cross references in the footnotes to explore connections with other scriptures. References to non-biblical sources have been kept to a minimum, as this book is not intended as an academic treatise.

I am very mindful of John's purpose in writing his Gospel: 'these [things] are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'.¹ I pray that you will encounter Jesus and come to a new awareness of God as your Father, for this is the reason why Jesus became flesh and lived among us.

¹ John 20:31.

FOREWORD

I have had the privilege of knowing Roy Millar for most of my life, initially meeting him when I attended a Scripture Union summer house party. I subsequently came to know him better in the context of a Bible class, and then at informal Bible study groups where my love for the Bible was nourished. Over the years, God has enabled Roy to influence many other people, including a number of other young teenage men and women who are now involved in Christian leadership in different parts of the world.

One of the root meanings of the word ‘disciple’ is ‘learner’. Roy has always been a learner with an enquiring mind, asking questions and searching for answers. His commitment to understanding Scripture, interpreting it faithfully and applying it ruthlessly has always impressed me. His approach has always been that to understand Scripture we stand under it. You will see all of this as you read *Come and See*.

I am delighted that he has stepped out into new paths and has written this book. He has approached John’s Gospel with humility, knowing it to be God’s inspired and authoritative Word. It has been said that the Bible is as up to date as this morning’s newspaper, and this book is a good illustration of that statement. It is not some cold academic exercise but rather it will both inform and inspire you. This book has been birthed in Roy’s personal Bible study and extensive reading and also through listening attentively to others. The long pregnancy of study and writing has now reached the point of delivery, and I have no doubt that this ‘new birth’ will be a blessing. *Come and See* has both spiritual and intellectual depth and provides much food for thought and material for quiet reflection. Roy has opened up this Gospel in fresh and intriguing ways and has pointed to the life-related and life-changing implications of John’s narrative. We will certainly be made to think, and at times we will be stopped in our tracks.

Roy has always been a humble explorer of God's Word, and this book is tangible evidence of those explorations. He is like a miner of the gold mine of the Bible who digs deep and brings out gold nuggets of biblical truth. He is like a travel guide who takes us on a journey of learning so that we see things we have never previously noticed. He is a teacher who communicates with sincerity from his lifetime of learning. Most of all, he leads us into a deeper relationship with the 'Author' of the Bible, which was John's stated purpose when writing his Gospel. As we read we will want to know Him better and worship and adore Him. Thank you, Roy, for pointing us to Him!

I have no hesitation whatsoever in commending this book. It will stretch our minds, warm our hearts and feed our souls. As we come and see the One who is the subject of John's Gospel, we will discover more of what it means to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and as we do so we shall truly experience life in His name.

Take time to graze and gaze!

Bishop Ken (Fanta) Clarke, formerly the Church of Ireland Bishop of Kilmore Elphin and Ardagh

INTRODUCTION

The Journey

In July 1969 Neil Armstrong completed the first stage of an epic journey and touched down safely on the surface of the moon. He had lived in a very different kind of world for all of his previous existence. The lunar environment in which he now found himself was bleak and barren and colourless and was devoid of the life and beauty of the world from which he had come. Neil Armstrong's visit coincided with his strong personal desire to make the journey, but the mission had its origins elsewhere: in the mind of President John F Kennedy. Armstrong was a volunteer, but he was also an agent of a higher authority and his mission was on behalf of the human race, as expressed in his historic words, 'One small step for [a] man, but one great leap for mankind.' When his mission had been completed, he ascended from the surface of the moon and returned to the 'parent world', where he was received with honour and glory.

This historical sequence has many features in common with the journey of Jesus as John describes it in his Gospel. Jesus, the Word through whom all things were made, came from another world which was the source of this one. He repeatedly stated that He came on the initiative of the Father and with His authority. Jesus stayed in communication with the Father and closely followed His instructions, for His ambition was to fulfil the purposes of the One who had sent Him. He travelled an inner and spiritual path in parallel to His outer and physical journey, as He was constantly guided by the Father through the Holy Spirit. When He had completed His assignment, climaxing in His death and resurrection, He returned to the glory that He had had with the Father before the world was made.

This is the heart of the journey that John describes, but within it he includes carefully selected events and particular milestones that provide a map for the journey. These milestones consist of a series of visits to Jerusalem in order to participate in the annual festivals, as was required of a Jewish man. It was in this context that most of the recorded events took place. This alerts us to the fact that the journey of Jesus was the culmination of a much longer journey, stretching back to Abraham and encompassing the entire history of the Jewish people. In fact, it also extended back to creation and the great disaster that overtook mankind and the world when man the creature disobeyed his Creator.¹

As *Come and See* was approaching completion, I read Tom Wright's biography of the apostle Paul, and I realised that John viewed the nature and purpose of Jesus' life on earth in a similar way to Paul, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and in his epistles.² Both John and Paul understood that Jesus was the culmination of the story of Israel, with all its covenant promises and all the prophecies of the coming Messiah. Jesus was the embodiment of all that Israel should have been but failed to be, and He was also its hope of ultimate deliverance and of becoming the channel of blessing for the world.

Tom Wright identified the Torah (strictly speaking the first five books in the Bible but sometimes used more loosely to include the remainder of the Hebrew Scriptures) and the Temple as the two loci around which the narrative of Jesus' life turns. This is clearly the case with John's Gospel in the context of major confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders. Representatives of the two main factions appear early in John's record as they each interrogate John the Baptist about his identity. First to come were the senior priests who regarded the Temple as 'our place', followed by the Pharisees who considered themselves as experts in interpretation of the Torah. Much of John's Gospel focuses on interactions between these two groups of protagonists and Jesus, on the issue of His identity and authority.

¹ Gen. 1:27; 1 Tim. 2:13-14.

² Tom Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (SPCK, 2018).

As was required of a Jewish man, Jesus attended the great pilgrim feasts in the Temple. These festivals recalled seminal events in the nation's history and were also enacted prophecies concerning the coming Messiah who would redeem His people from oppression and would pour out the Holy Spirit on Israel. It was in the context of these festivals that controversy was stirred as Jesus revealed Himself as Lord of the Temple and of the Sabbath, as the source of the living water of the Spirit, as the Light of the world, as the Good Shepherd (in contrast to the bad shepherds), as the Passover Lamb, as the Messiah King, and as the Resurrection and the Life. In the context of Passover season He also revealed Himself as the One greater than Moses and as the true manna. He was thus claiming to be the culmination and goal of all of Israel's history and hope, the living Temple and the embodiment of Torah.

John described five distinct stages in this journey. Jesus' incarnation was the first stage, when, 'The Word became flesh'.³ His subsequent growth to mature manhood was documented in Luke's Gospel but not explicitly by John.⁴

The second stage began when Jesus visited with John the Baptist. In this context He was baptised and anointed with the Holy Spirit, and He also received His first disciples. This second stage, lasting for almost three years, continues to the end of John chapter 12. During this period many other people were on journeys that interconnected with Jesus' journey. Those who were open to receive His words remained with Him, and their inner and spiritual journeys gradually bent and converged towards His. In Jesus' own words, they became 'children of light'.⁵

Also during this second stage, Jesus interacted with a number of individuals whose reactions revealed the varying conditions of their hearts. All *came and saw* the same person but with differing and contrasting responses. One was a highly esteemed Pharisee and teacher whose initial and tentative inquiry finally blossomed into committed faith over a period of three years. Another was a

³ John 1:14.

⁴ Luke 2:40-52; 3:23.

⁵ John 12:36.

complete outsider, a Samaritan woman with a troubled background, whose heart opened to Jesus when He revealed Himself to her as the Messiah for whom she had been waiting. A third was a beggar who moved, in the course of a single day, from physical blindness to physical and spiritual sight, worshipping Jesus as the Son of God.

Others, principally from the ruling religious elite, were incensed by what they saw and heard. Jesus performed a number of miracle-signs that pointed to His identity as the Son of God. In the light of this evidence He challenged them to believe in Him as the One whom the Father had sent into the world. (Most of Jesus' recorded words in this section were primarily directed towards this group, although they also contained excellent instructions for the disciples who were also present.) Sadly, the majority of the leaders refused the light that Jesus brought and they became increasingly hostile towards Him, determined to stop Him in His tracks. By rejecting His words in favour of a version of truth that was convenient to themselves, they moved progressively, and ultimately irreversibly, into ever-increasing spiritual darkness. This choice, of darkness rather than light and power rather than truth, would finally lead to the destruction of everything that those leaders treasured and cherished.

This stage of the journey concluded with a final appeal from Jesus to the Jewish leaders. It fell on deaf ears and their time of opportunity was now at an end. John's Gospel acts as a warning that to encounter Jesus on the journey of life is not a neutral experience. We are either drawn closer to the light in company with Jesus, or plunged deeper into darkness if we choose to reject or ignore Him.

The third stage of the journey was very short but intense. It lasted for only a few hours but it occupies five chapters, from 13 to 17. Jesus' entire focus was now on the faithful disciple band, as He prepared them for immediate challenges and also for the subsequent mission that they would undertake after being empowered by the Holy Spirit. At the conclusion of this stage Jesus was able to say to the Father, 'I glorified you on the earth. I have

accomplished the work which you have given me to do.⁶ At that time He prayed for His followers as they faced a traumatic few days without Him, and contemplated His return in glory to the world from which He had come. Sadly, Judas, who had closely observed Jesus and had seen much evidence for His identity, left the company of the disciples and went out into the night, having previously chosen the path of darkness.

The fourth stage was the most challenging of all for Jesus and His followers. Jesus was betrayed and arrested and the disciples were scattered and devastated. Peter suffered additional emotional trauma, for he denied Jesus after having promised to remain faithful at any cost to himself. Jesus was put on trial before Pilate, the Roman Governor, during which time He was scourged, mocked and rejected by the leaders of Israel. As the trial neared its end, the contest between truth and power and between light and darkness reached its crescendo in the shocking words of the High Priest, 'We have no king but Caesar!'⁷ This part of Jesus' journey was one of agony and deep darkness, both physical and spiritual, but as it ended He re-emerged into the light with a cry of completion and victory: 'It is finished!'⁸

The last stage of the journey involved Jesus' resurrection and reunion with His followers, when He reassured and restored their troubled hearts. Thomas, who had been absent when Jesus appeared to the others, demanded visible proof before he would believe. Jesus graciously extended the invitation to come and see, to physically inspect the wounds in His hands and feet and side, and Thomas responded in worship.

After Jesus had ascended to the Father the disciples would continue the same journey that they had begun in company with Jesus, for that had always been His intention from the time that He had called them. He commissioned them for their task with the words, 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you', and He then breathed on them saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit!'⁹

⁶ John 17:4.

⁷ John 19:15.

⁸ John 19:30.

⁹ John 20:21-22.

These words and the accompanying action were in token of the promise of the Father to pour out the Holy Spirit upon them. Jesus' earthly mission had now been completed and He would soon ascend to the glory at the Father's right hand, but He would continue His work in and through them. When He had spoken of the coming of the Spirit, He informed them that this would be equivalent to His own presence within them. They, together with those who would receive their words, would continue His journey until the end of the age and would thus complete the mission that the Father had entrusted to Him.

John recorded a final and very touching incident, describing how Peter was fully restored and recommissioned for the journey ahead. This is a sign of hope for any of us who have faltered and assumed, incorrectly, that our journey with Jesus is all over.

John 1:1-5

In the Beginning Was the Word

1:1-3 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him. Without him, nothing was made that has been made.

With these majestic words John commenced his account of the man whose disciple he had been for more than three years. John had been present at all the significant events and teachings of those years, and he was one of only three apostles who were chosen to accompany Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and also to stay close to Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He stood at the cross in company with Jesus' mother and he was the first apostle to arrive at the empty tomb. He had been in a close and intimate relationship with Jesus and had come to understand that He is the only begotten Son of God.¹

The opening phrase in Greek, *en arche*, echoes the first word in the Hebrew Bible, *b'reshit* ('in the beginning'), announcing the unfolding events of creation by the Word and the Spirit of God. The events that John was about to describe were nothing less than the beginning of the new creation through that same agency of the Word and the Spirit. John's opening statement, 'In the beginning was the Word', was made without context or explanation, provoking questions that demand answers. Who or what is this Word and what is His/Its relationship to the God of Genesis 1? Was John simply saying that God communicates and that He

¹ Luke 9:28-29; John 13:21-26; Mark 13:32-34; John 19:25-27; 20:1-10.

created the world by speaking it into existence? Was it just a description of how God had chosen to act in creating the universe?

The second statement, 'the Word was with God', implies that God and the Word are not identical but are in an association of some kind. In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom made a similar claim in the context of creation:

The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, before the earth existed ... then I was the craftsman by his side. I was a delight day by day, always rejoicing before him.²

As in John's introduction of the Word, Wisdom appears to be a person rather than merely a personal attribute. The motif of Wisdom personified as a royal counsellor at God's side continues throughout Jewish wisdom literature, and is the context within which Jesus is identified here in John's Gospel and also throughout the New Testament as the wisdom of God.

John's third statement – 'the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him. Without him, nothing was made that has been made' – clearly indicates that the Word is none other than the Creator God Himself. Does this mean that 'Word' is simply a synonym for 'God', or does this statement express some complex and more profound truth? John would have been mindful of the outlook of first-century Jewish readers and their passionate belief in the truth that God is one. Their core credal assertion was expressed in the Shema: 'Hear, Israel: the LORD is our God. The LORD is one.'³ Many of their forefathers had died as martyrs as a result of persecution by a Greek king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167–164 BCE). In order to sanctify the name of God they had accepted death rather than agree to worship pagan gods. Any suggestion of polytheism would thus have been anathema to John's contemporaries.⁴

² Prov. 8:22-23, 30.

³ Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:28-34.

⁴ 1 Maccabees 1:10-63.

This creedal statement can be understood in a different way that is also consistent with the Hebrew text: “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”⁵ This insists that there is only one God but does not define His personal nature. The Scriptures contain many allusions to relationship within the Godhead.⁶ This was recognised by Jewish scholars prior to the time of Jesus and also at the time when John wrote his Gospel.⁷ John’s purpose in writing was to reveal that Jesus is the mysterious person to whom those writings referred, the Son of God and the One whose mission on earth was to give eternal life to all who would believe in Him:

Therefore Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.⁸

In the process John would reveal how the religious leaders, who held to a rigid and exclusive interpretation of the Shema, had rejected Jesus and had dismissed His claims as blasphemous.⁹

The opening verses of Genesis 1 indicate that God launched the whole process of creation with the command, ‘Let there be light.’ John was giving a radically new interpretation of this scripture. God the Father did not create the universe simply by a spoken word but through the willing agency of His Son, of whom John wrote, ‘All things were made through him. Without him, nothing was made that has been made.’ He it was who had released all the energy that was required for the universe to come into existence in all its grandeur and complexity.¹⁰ In his Gospel, John describes the Father’s purpose to restore the broken creation, again through His Son, now revealed in the person of Jesus, the Word made flesh.

⁵ Deut. 6:4 ESVUK alternative translation.

⁶ For example, Prov. 30:4; Isa. 48:16; Ps. 110:1, c.f. Matt. 22:41-45.

⁷ Risto Santala, *The Messiah in the Old Testament in the Light of Rabbinical Writings* (Jerusalem: Keren Ahvah Meshihit 1992), pp. 86-92.

⁸ John 20:30-31.

⁹ John 8:58-59; 10:30-31.

¹⁰ Gen. 1:3; Heb. 1:1-3.

1:4-5 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it.

In John's understanding, life and light are intimately connected. The light that flooded the primeval darkness flowed from the eternal and self-sustaining life of God. As human creatures our lives are contingent on sources outside of ourselves, such as food, air, water, other people, and ultimately on God Himself. Jesus was fully human and His biological life was sustained from the resources of the earth, but He also possessed the same life as the Father for, 'In him was life'.¹¹

As the eternal Word, Jesus created the physical light that still pervades the universe. As the incarnate Word, He radiated the glory of God and brought spiritual illumination to all those who would receive Him, for 'the life was the light of men'. In this way John identified Jesus as the great light that had come in order to shine on those who sat in darkness, as the fountain of life and in whose light we see light, as the Lord who is our light and our salvation and who would also shine His light upon the Gentiles.¹²

John made twenty-four references to light in the first twelve chapters of the Gospel, but there are none at all in the subsequent ones. Life features thirty-nine times in the first twelve chapters but only seven times in the remainder. Love occurs twelve times in the first twelve chapters and forty-five times in the final nine chapters. This change of emphasis occurs at the point when Jesus switched His attention from what John calls 'the world', those who have resisted and rejected His word, to His disciples, who are 'not of this world', because they have believed and received His word. Jesus spoke repeatedly of love to those who gladly received the light that He brought to them through His words and actions. The true light, which enlightens everyone, had indeed come into the world.¹³

The apostle Paul used the same imagery of light and darkness, creation and new creation, in a way that mirrors John's

¹¹ See also John 1:14; 5:25-27; 8:42, 58, 10:30; 11:25-26; 15:1-5; 17:24.

¹² John 1:4-5, 8:12, 9:5; Ps. 36:9; Isa. 9:2; 49:6.

¹³ John 1:9.

introduction to his Gospel: ‘seeing it is God who said, “Light will shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’.¹⁴ The disciples in the Upper Room did not require further instruction about light and darkness, but they did need to know how to live in relationship with Jesus and with one another in the context of the surrounding hostile world.¹⁵

The Jewish leaders were exposed to the same light as the disciples but were so blinded by their own prejudices and agendas that they did not perceive Jesus as light. They did not comprehend (understand) His words because those words did not fit with their understanding of reality and truth, thus precipitating a collision between light and darkness. Paul also wrote:

Even if our Good News is veiled, it is veiled in those who are dying, in whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the Good News of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn on them.¹⁶

Light ultimately prevailed over darkness, for Jesus fulfilled the Father’s purpose when, in perfect obedience, He laid down His life and was raised again in triumph.¹⁷

We live at a time in history when there is increasing hostility to the Gospel and severe persecution from those who love darkness rather than light. Those who remain true to the light may suffer for their faithfulness, but they too will ultimately be vindicated.¹⁸

¹⁴ 2 Cor. 4:6.

¹⁵ John 14:23; 15:4-10, 17, 18; 16:26-28; 17:20-26; 21:15-17.

¹⁶ 2 Cor. 4:3-4.

¹⁷ John 19:30; 20:14-17; Phil. 2:5-11.

¹⁸ 2 Tim. 4:6-8; Rev. 2:10; Rev. 6:9-11; Rev. 7:9-17.

John 1:40-51

Come and See

1:40-42 One of the two who heard John and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother, Simon, and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah!' (which is, being interpreted, Christ). He brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him, and said, 'You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas' (which is by interpretation, Peter).

Very soon after this Andrew sought out his brother Simon and, breathless with excitement, blurted out, 'We have found the Messiah!' That's what (who) they had been looking for. The implication is clear: a group of young men from Galilee had been on a quest to find the Messiah. John the Baptist seemed to be the 'Elijah who was to come', so they followed him in the hope and expectation that the Messiah would soon be revealed.¹ This is the first in a series of incidents that include the word 'found', which raises the question, who was seeking and who was finding? The usual Jewish answer to a question of this sort is that everyone was both a seeker and a finder. Andrew personified the archetypal disciple/evangelist as he shared the good news that he had just discovered. He did not just share information but also introduced Simon to Jesus.

This information about how Jesus first met Peter, Andrew and John helps to explain the accounts in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). The impression from Matthew and Mark is that a complete stranger called a group of fishermen to follow Him and, without further ado, they immediately left their

¹ Dan. 9:24-27.

nets and families and accompanied Him. Luke's expanded version includes the miracle of a huge catch of fish, focusing on Peter's awestruck and terrified response as the identity of Jesus suddenly overwhelmed him. He became acutely aware of his sinfulness and the danger of being close to such power and holiness. This mismatch of sin and holiness was the problem that the people of Israel had faced in the wilderness, and God had provided the solution in the form of the Tabernacle. Jesus' human body was God's true tabernacle, allowing people like Peter to come close to Him. Jesus reassured him with characteristic words, 'Don't be afraid.'²

When Jesus first encountered Simon, He 'looked at him' with prophetic insight and gave him a new name that marked a transition point in his life. Changing names was an ancient practice in Israel. God gave Abram a new name at a critical point in his life, when the promised son Isaac was about to be conceived. Abram meant 'high father' and Abraham meant 'father of a multitude'. Similarly, Jacob was renamed Israel when he had a close encounter with God and was about to re-enter the Promised Land after a long exile in Haran. As would be the case with Simon/Peter, both names continued to be used while character transformation was under way.³ *Cephas* is equivalent to 'stone' or 'rock', suggesting 'firm/unyielding/stable', which were not native qualities in impulsive and reactive Simon. Jesus saw what Simon was not yet but would become as they journeyed together.⁴

It is surely significant that John chose to retain three Hebrew or Aramaic words rather than simply use the Greek equivalents. By so doing he is emphasising the Jewish culture of which Jesus, humanly speaking, was a product. It also reveals John's own Hebrew roots and worldview. *Rabbi* is simply a transliteration from Hebrew into Greek, and is explained as meaning 'teacher'. *Cephas* has Aramaic origins, but a similar word meaning 'rocks' is found in two Hebrew texts in the Scriptures.⁵

² Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11.

³ Gen. 17:5, 15-16; 32:28; 46:2, 5.

⁴ Matt. 16:16, 18, 22-23; 26:33; Luke 22:31-34, 54-62; John 21:15-19.

⁵ Job 30:6; Jer. 4:29.

John's use of a transliterated version of the Hebrew word *Messiah* is particularly significant to his purpose of revealing Jesus' identity, for He was the embodiment of all the promises of the former Scriptures. The Greek word *Christ* also means 'Anointed One', but it lacks the historical and prophetic roots of the Hebrew word. In the apostolic era, when John's Gospel was written, the word *Christ* could be used interchangeably with *Messiah*, but it gradually lost much of its original content as the predominantly Gentile church became increasingly divorced from its Hebrew roots. This eventually became a deliberate policy in response to Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

Many contemporary Christians appear to regard Jesus Christ as the founder of a new religion – Christianity – whereas He is the fulfilment of and central person in the one faith that began with Abraham and will persist until the end of time.

1:43-51 *On the next day, he was determined to go out into Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him, 'Follow me.'*

Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, 'We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'

Nathanael said to him, 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?'

Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said about him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!'

Nathanael said to him, 'How do you know me?'

Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.'

Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are King of Israel!'

Jesus answered him, 'Because I told you, "I saw you underneath the fig tree," do you believe? You will see greater things than these!' He said to him, 'Most certainly, I tell you all, hereafter you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'

The next day Jesus set out for Galilee. It is not clear whether He travelled to Bethsaida on the north shore of the lake or met with Philip and Nathanael elsewhere in the region. What does seem clear is that this first group of disciples consisted of friends who shared a common quest to find the Messiah. Jesus now took the initiative and found Philip, who responded to His invitation to follow Him. At first sight this may seem strange, but perhaps there is a clue in Philip's subsequent statement to Nathanael: 'We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'⁶ Philip had been convinced as a result of his personal interaction with Jesus, and from listening to Him as He explained the Scriptures. Probably Andrew and John had previously experienced something similar during their overnight stay with Jesus. Later, following His resurrection, He said to them, 'This is what I told you, while I was still with you, that all things which are written in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me must be fulfilled.'⁶ These men were hungry to discover the truth and they had set no preconditions on how they would respond when they found it. They had no personal agendas to protect, in contrast with others whom we will meet again later in the Gospel.

Philip's immediate thought was similar to Andrew's: I must share this news with my friend Nathanael who is also seeking the Messiah. Nathanael's logic suggested that the second part of Philip's news, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph', cancelled out the first part, 'We have found [the Messiah].' It seems that Nazareth did not enjoy a good reputation, so 'good news' combined with 'Nazareth' constituted an oxymoron. Philip could have argued with Nathanael about this but, wisely, he chose a different strategy and invited him to 'Come and see'. Perhaps Philip took his cue from the way Jesus had extended a similar invitation to Andrew and John.⁷ Philip's friendship and honest testimony overcame Nathanael's prejudice and scepticism and he was willing to investigate the matter for himself. This may be the earliest example of friendship evangelism; we should not reject

⁶ Luke 24:44.

⁷ John 1:39.

people who do not immediately respond to our offer of the good news.

So Nathanael came to see for himself. Jesus interacted with Nathanael in a fascinating way that had deep roots in the Scriptures. He began by disarming Nathanael with the statement, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!’ Jesus saw a heart that thirsted for integrity and truth.

Nathanael knew that this was no mere flattery, and was hooked and drawn in by this unexpected insight: ‘How do you know me?’

Jesus replied in a way that seems strange unless something else was going on under the surface: ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’

Nathanael’s response, coming from an erstwhile sceptic, was nothing short of astounding, and at first sight it seems inexplicable: ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’

The mystery deepened as Jesus said (in effect), you think that’s amazing, but you haven’t seen anything yet! ‘Most certainly, I tell you all, hereafter you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’⁸

We have to ask ourselves, ‘What is going on here?’ There must be more than meets the eye.’ Of course there was and, as usual, the keys are contained in the Scriptures. Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree, a place of *shalom* and a good place to meditate on the Word of God.⁹ Possibly he was reflecting on the story of Jacob, whose name implied deceit but who was transformed into Israel by a direct encounter with God. It seems likely that Nathanael had been pondering on the meaning of the dream that Jacob had seen at Bethel, when heaven and earth were joined by a mysterious stairway, thus creating access to God.¹⁰ It was some kind of

⁸ Throughout the text of the Gospels the WEBBE translates *amen, amen* as ‘most certainly’, whereas in other parts of the New Testament the same two Hebrew words are retained, as is the case in the Greek text. This translation reduces the force of the words from a statement of absolute and final authority to an expression of assurance. Jesus is the Amen: Rev. 3:14. *Amen, amen* is utilised in all of my subsequent comments.

⁹ Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10.

¹⁰ Gen. 27:36; 32:24-32; 28:10-22.

prophecy, but what could it mean? Could it be pointing to the Messiah for whom they were earnestly looking?

Jesus had seen Nathanael's location before Philip had spoken to him, and He had read his thoughts and knew the deepest longings of his heart. Who else could do such things except the Messiah, the Son of God and the King of Israel!¹¹ Nathanael had been willing to accept the invitation to 'come and see', and now the former sceptic was lost in wonder, love and praise. His scepticism evaporated when he encountered Philip's new friend, and he was willing to listen to what He had to say and give Him a fair hearing. Jesus subsequently promised that the truth would be revealed to anyone who has a genuine desire to do God's will.¹² It is sad that many people are unwilling to make the radical changes that faith and commitment will require; others are not prepared to devote the time and effort that a thorough examination of the evidence would require, preferring to respond with stock objections.

Nathanael said to Jesus, 'You are the Son of God', but Jesus referred to Himself as the 'Son of Man'. We will explore the significance of this title in a later chapter.

The stairway connecting earth and heaven could not be constructed from below, for man's attempts to do this always end in failure and disaster.¹³ Jesus came down from heaven, as Son of God and Son of Man, so that we could share fellowship with the Father here on earth, and then live in His immediate presence forever.¹⁴

Nathanael also called Jesus the 'King of Israel'. Nathanael, like other Jews of his day, expected that the Messiah would come as king. The angel Gabriel confirmed this when he informed Mary that her son would be conceived by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was acclaimed as king by the crowds who welcomed Him to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Pilate, perhaps in an act of retaliation against the

¹¹ These three aspects of the Coming One are present in the account of the visit of the wise men to Herod, Matt. 2:1-4.

¹² John 7:17.

¹³ Gen. 3:5-6; 11:1-9.

¹⁴ John 3:13-17, 6:33, 51, 58, 14:1-6; 17:24-26.

Jewish leaders, placarded this title on the cross.¹⁵ Immediately before Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples asked Him if He was about to restore the Kingdom to Israel. The question was not relevant to the immediate mission on which He was about to send them, which was to proclaim the good news of salvation to ever widening circles of people. At that moment the question was theoretical rather than practical and the answer could await its appointed time.

The disciples, like John the Baptist, correctly anticipated that all the promises concerning the Messiah would be literally and physically fulfilled, including His reign as the King of Israel, but they did not understand that this would happen in two stages.¹⁶

When a prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures was couched in physical terms it was usually fulfilled in a physical way, such as Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and His coming out of Egypt.¹⁷ Prophecies that were clothed in metaphorical language were also usually fulfilled in literal and physical ways, even if the manner was not initially apparent.¹⁸ We who live in the interval between His first and second comings have the advantage of identifying those prophecies of Scripture that still await their fulfilment. There is no reason to assume that the as yet unfulfilled prophecies have only an allegorical or metaphorical sense, as some do, rather than the physical and literal sense that characterised His first coming. The prophet Zechariah predicted that the feet of the Messiah would stand on the Mount of Olives, and this was affirmed by the angels when Jesus ascended from that site. Jesus said to Jerusalem that He would only return there when its inhabitants were ready with the words of greeting from Psalm 118: 'Blessed is he who comes in the LORD's name! We have blessed you out of the LORD's house.'¹⁹

¹⁵ Luke 1:31-33; John 12:12-15; 19:19-22.

¹⁶ Acts 1:3, 6-7; Luke 7:18-23.

¹⁷ Mic. 5:2 and Matt. 2:4-6; Hos. 11:1 and Matt. 2:13-15.

¹⁸ Jer. 31:15 and Matt. 2:16-18.

¹⁹ Zech. 14:3-4; Acts 1:9-12; Luke 13:33-35; Ps. 118:26.

John 4:4-26

Living Water

4:4-9 He needed to pass through Samaria. So he came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son, Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being tired from his journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

The Samaritan woman therefore said to him, 'How is it that you, being a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?' (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

Jesus had left Jerusalem some time previously and now decided to continue north to Galilee, possibly prompted to do so by the hostile attitude of the Pharisees. Two alternative routes existed: a more direct one through Samaria and a longer one skirting around it. Jews tended to use the indirect route in order to avoid Samaritans, so John's statement that Jesus 'needed to pass through Samaria' is intriguing. It is not necessary to suppose that He knew what He would encounter there. John's Gospel portrays Jesus as responding to the Father's guidance in an ongoing way rather than following a prearranged schedule. He simply needed to know that this was the route that His Father had chosen.

After walking for some hours He arrived with His disciples at Jacob's well, which was located at the foot of Mount Ebal and at the crossing point of several roads. The village of Sychar was about half a mile to the north, close to the town of Shechem. Shechem was the site of many foundational events in Israel's history. This fact would be highly significant in the conversation that Jesus was about to have with the woman. Abraham and Jacob had lived at

Shechem and Jacob had bought a plot of land there, in token of God's promise that his descendants would possess the whole land. (In a similar way, Abraham had purchased and acquired title deeds to the field at Hebron, where the three Patriarchs would later be buried.) Jacob's sons conquered Shechem in battle (albeit in a dubious way), prefiguring the subsequent conquest of the land. Joseph's bones were preserved and carried from Egypt to be buried at Shechem in the field that Jacob had bequeathed to him.¹ Soon after the Israelites entered Canaan, Joshua brought them to Mount Ebal, where they built an altar and renewed the covenant that they had previously made with God at Sinai. Shechem was also the place where the ten tribes revolted against the House of David, thus dividing the nation. Jeroboam then made it his capital city and led the nation into idolatry, rejecting the Temple in Jerusalem as God's exclusive place of worship.²

The Samaritans were descendants of Gentiles who had been sent to the land of Israel by the Assyrian king after the exile of the ten northern tribes.³ Some Israelites who subsequently returned from exile intermarried with these settlers. Together they followed the religious beliefs and practices contained in the first five books of the Bible and rejected the other Jewish Scriptures. Using the Pentateuch for their authority and legitimacy, they constructed a historical narrative that began with the Patriarchs but excluded the House of David. They substituted Mount Gerazim for Mount Ebal as the first place of Israelite worship in the Land and built their temple there, in opposition to the one in Jerusalem.⁴

Although the Samaritans were strictly observant of the requirements of the Torah of Moses, most Jews regarded them as inferior because of their origins and because they rejected the other Jewish Scriptures and the Temple in Jerusalem. 'Samaritan' was used as a term of abuse; Jesus was insulted in this way.⁵ Nevertheless, Samaritans were not considered to be pagans, and

¹ Gen. 12:6; 33:18-19; 34:26; 37:12-14; 48:22; Josh. 24:32.

² Deut. 27:1-13; Josh. 8:30-35; 1 Chron. 22:1; 2 Chron.3:1-2; 6:1-11; 1 Kgs. 12:25-31.

³ 2 Kings 17:24-41.

⁴ Deut. 27:4-7.

⁵ John 8:48.

during the lifetime of Jesus their food was regarded as clean. It is interesting that the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable revealed his love for the injured man by prioritising the man's need over the purity regulations in the Torah, in contrast to the priest and the Levite who kept at a safe distance and avoided contamination.

Jesus arrived at the well near Sychar after a long journey in the early summer heat. It was probably noon (although 6pm is also possible if Roman time was being used). Being fully human, Jesus was tired and weary and probably also thirsty. He sat beside the well while the disciples walked the half-mile to the village in search of food. In their absence, a woman arrived at the well. Her clothing would have identified her as a Samaritan. She must have encountered the group of Jewish men walking towards Sychar and had probably found this intimidating. Probably they passed her without speaking, for they were later surprised to find that Jesus was talking with her.

Jesus, an obviously Jewish man, was sitting beside the well from which she needed to draw water. This would have been disconcerting for her, an unaccompanied woman and a Samaritan. She was at a disadvantage in many ways, being inferior in status and vulnerable, and perhaps she feared that this man would reject and insult her. Jesus broke the awkward silence with a simple and genuine request: 'Give me a drink.' This initiative reversed the customary social conventions of male-female and Samaritan-Jewish interactions, causing her to react in amazement, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

Jesus surprised her by His willingness to ask for help from one such as her, rather than standing aloof or making a contemptuous demand. She was also aware that Jesus lacked the means to provide for His own needs. This elevated her to a position of power because she could refuse His request. Jesus' approach enabled her to enter into dialogue as an equal and thus opened the way for her to receive from Him. His attitude intrigued her and she was emboldened to ask questions that would pave the way for her to receive the truth.

4:10-15 *Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'*

The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. So where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father, Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his children and his livestock?'

Jesus answered her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never thirst again; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.'

The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I don't get thirsty, neither come all the way here to draw.'

The woman had power to supply Jesus with water from the well, He having no bucket for the purpose. He claimed power to supply her with a superior kind of water by means of an identity of which she was as yet unaware, and a grace that she had never previously experienced. By the end of the conversation she would know that God is a gracious and generous Father and that Jesus is the true Messiah, not only of the Jewish people but also of Samaritans like herself.

As with Nicodemus, she initially interpreted Jesus' words in a strictly literal way, possibly regarding them as far-fetched or ridiculous. Also, His words pointed to a source other than Jacob's well, and an implied superior status and authority as compared to the great Patriarch who was at the roots of Samaritan history and identity. Certainly, Jews could be arrogant and contemptuous of Samaritans, but this was outrageous, and it was also threatening to their culture and heritage.

Jesus ignored all of these undercurrents and renewed His offer, now making it universal: 'whoever'. He was claiming power and authority that went far beyond the present encounter. He reminded the woman that He was not offering static water from a well – water such as Jacob had been able to provide – but living and flowing and bubbling water, an endless and limitless fountain of life. This water can quench the thirst of the human heart for

meaning and identity and satisfaction, and is the very essence of joy.

Perhaps, on later reflection, she might have thought that Jacob, like herself, had been striving to obtain what could only be received as a gift from God. Before Jacob's birth, God had promised that he would be the one who would receive the inheritance of Abraham and Isaac, but Jacob did not trust God to bring this about. Instead he schemed and lied in an attempt to make it happen. Only when he had been stripped down to a state of utter helplessness could he receive the blessing from the hand of God.⁶ The woman responded to Jesus in a respectful way, for His words had touched a chord in her heart. His words intrigued her but the deeper significance remained elusive.

4:16-18 *Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come here.'*

The woman answered, 'I have no husband.'

Jesus said to her, 'You said well, "I have no husband," for you have had five husbands; and he whom you now have is not your husband. This you have said truly.'

At this point Jesus shot an arrow into her heart. No doubt there were many issues in her life, but He identified the one that overshadowed everything else. It coloured all other aspects of her life and had determined her present circumstances, her feelings and her very identity. Jesus only spoke about this one aspect of her life, but it was 'the one thing' that was her constant companion. She expressed this later when she informed her neighbours about 'a man who told me everything that I did', and they saw no reason to disagree.⁷ Two questions arise: how did Jesus know about her marital status, and what circumstances had caused it to be as it currently was?

John previously informed us that Jesus 'didn't need for anyone to testify concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man'.⁸ However, this does not mean that, at every moment in time, He carried in His mind the details of every human being. He lived in

⁶ Gen. 25:21-23; 27:18-29, 41-46; 32:24-31.

⁷ John 4:29.

⁸ John 2:23-25.

intimate relationship with His Father and received guidance through the Holy Spirit in a dynamic and ongoing way. The process may have simply involved a word of knowledge, the impression on His mind of a few words – ‘five husbands ... not your husband’. This is important to us because Jesus is the model for His followers. After His resurrection He would say, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit!”⁹

It is commonly believed that this woman had been in a series of marriages, each of which had ended in divorce, and that she was now living in an immoral relationship. This was why she was shunned by the other women and came to the well alone. This is a possible explanation, but it is not necessarily true, and it actually seems less probable than the alternative. Jesus did not deny the validity of these five relationships, describing all the men as having been her husbands. The Law of Moses required a surviving male relative to marry a childless widow and raise up children to inherit the deceased man’s property. Samaritans shared this portion of Scripture with the Jews and probably followed the same practice. On one occasion the Sadducees challenged Jesus with a question about a woman who had, in succession, been the wife of seven brothers. Their question ignored the tragic life of the woman who had been passed from one man to another and yet remained childless, a cause of great shame.¹⁰

Western categories typically operate within the framework of truth/falsehood and innocence/guilt, but the overriding factor in many Eastern situations is honour/shame, as is still clearly seen in issues to do with marriage. A woman with this history would probably have been seen as undesirable and dangerous, and possibly as being under some sort of curse. The man with whom she was now living may have been a relative who was unwilling to marry her but who was prepared to provide her with practical support. What a burden she would have carried, a deep pain in her heart, a crippling sense of shame and a daily experience of

⁹ 1 Cor. 12:8; John 20:21-22.

¹⁰ Deut. 25:5-10; Ruth 4:1-12; Matt. 22:23-28.

rejection. Samaritans experienced a similar corporate wound because they were despised by the Jews.

4:19-20 *The woman said to him, 'Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.'*

Jesus' words had exposed the hurt at the centre of the woman's heart, too painful to discuss with a stranger. She could not deny the truth of His words and she received them as evidence that He was a prophet. She now deftly moved the conversation to the subject of religion, which was much safer ground! This, of course, is still a common device to deflect from sensitive personal issues. She referenced a core theological dispute, no doubt pointing to nearby Mount Gerizim, where the Temple had stood until it was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, one of the Maccabean rulers of Judah, in 130 BCE. Which side of the dispute was correct? Who were orthodox and who were the heretics?

If Jesus was a true prophet then He should know, and perhaps He would vindicate the Samaritan position. After all, the Pentateuch did not specify Jerusalem as the correct place for worship. God had promised to reveal this to the people after they entered the Land. Samaritans believed (incorrectly) that Mount Gerizim was the initial place of sacrifice, giving it priority over Jerusalem. They also appealed to historical connections with Jacob and Joseph.¹¹

4:21-24 *Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour comes, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, will you worship the Father. You worship that which you don't know. We worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour comes, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such to be his worshippers. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'*

¹¹ Deut. 12:5, 13-14; 27:4-6.

Jesus saw through the façade of religious language into her aching and longing heart. He addressed her gently in the same way as He did His mother, ‘Woman’, and then firmly required her to accept His authoritative word, ‘believe me’. The focus was no longer on externals, including the place of worship. What mattered now was to know God as Father, in relationship with Jesus through the Holy Spirit, for Whom living water was a metaphor. The Spirit was currently present with her in the person of Jesus, and He would come within her as a result of the work that Jesus would complete in His death and resurrection. Of course, Jesus did not explain the details of this to her; all that she needed to know now was that the Father welcomed genuine worshippers, those who would draw near to His presence regardless of their origins or personal histories.

Jesus is not the final destination of our journey of faith but is the way to the Father. Christians often stop short, happy to be in a love relationship with Jesus, but this was not His ultimate purpose. I have often heard people use the expression, ‘It’s not about us; it’s all about Jesus!’ The first part is certainly true, but Jesus would have denied the second, for His quest is to bring us to the Father.¹²

Jesus stated that true worshippers would – indeed, must – worship the Father in spirit and in truth. They must come on His terms and not on their own. The woman needed to reject a tribal religious narrative that was based on a selective reading of Scripture, and accept God’s sovereign choice of Israel as His channel of salvation. Jesus identified Himself as a Jew: ‘We worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews.’ Some Samaritans had a deep antipathy concerning this truth, and subsequently one village would not receive Jesus because His face was set to go to Jerusalem. In so doing they were opposing the purposes of God, for His Messiah must be offered there for their sins and for the sins of the world.

When Philip subsequently travelled to Samaria to preach the gospel, many people responded, but the Holy Spirit was not poured out until Peter and John came from Jerusalem to lay hands

¹² John 14:6; 16:26-27; 1 John 3:1-3; 1 Pet. 3:18.

on them. God required the Samaritans to acknowledge His choice and submit to His divinely ordained order.¹³

4:25-26 *The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah comes, he who is called Christ. When he has come, he will declare to us all things.'*
Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who speaks to you.'

The woman shared with her community a belief that one day the Messiah would come, and then all the problems and issues would be resolved. The Jewish stranger's words were intriguing and His knowledge about her was uncanny and disturbing. What could it all mean? Then Jesus said, 'I am he, the one who speaks to you.' Others had and would call Jesus Messiah, but she was the only human being ever to hear this direct testimony from His own lips. He had said, 'The hour comes, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.' A doctrinal belief in a future event had now been transformed into a present encounter, with the Promised One who stood before her and gazed into her eyes with understanding and compassion. A veil suddenly lifted from her inner eyes, her wounded heart was healed, and she suddenly became uniquely qualified to bring healing to the wounded community of her Samaritan village.

¹³ Luke 9:51-53; Acts 8:12-17, 25.

John 11:32-40

Grief and Groaning

11:32-37 Therefore when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying to him, 'Lord, if you would have been here, my brother wouldn't have died.'

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews weeping who came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, and said, 'Where have you laid him?'

They told him, 'Lord, come and see.'

Jesus wept.

The Jews therefore said, 'See how much affection he had for him!' Some of them said, 'Couldn't this man, who opened the eyes of him who was blind, have also kept this man from dying?'

Mary and Martha were both devoted to Jesus and to their brother and they both approached Jesus with the same words. Otherwise each was very different in how she expressed her emotions, and Jesus was sensitive to this fact. Martha processed her distress by means of words and logic, so Jesus adopted this medium of communication. Mary responded in more physical ways, weeping and falling down at Jesus' feet. Mary's visible expression of her acute emotional pain was echoed in His heart. Jesus was fully human, with all that that implies; He was not merely playing a part, like an actor in a drama.

Words could not convey what Jesus was feeling, and they would have been powerless to alleviate Mary's suffering. Instead, He asked the simple and practical question, 'Where have you laid him?', as the answer would take the process forward towards resolution. The question also anticipated the one that another Mary would subsequently ask in proximity to Jesus' empty tomb, subtly

making a connection between Lazarus' resurrection and His own.¹ John tells us that 'the Jews' had accompanied Mary and that they now answered, 'Lord, come and see.' These words are reminiscent of the words that Jesus had used when His first two disciples, Andrew and John, began to follow Him, and also of the words Philip had used when he introduced his friend Nathanael to Jesus.² On those two occasions at the outset of Jesus' public ministry, these words marked the end of a quest to find the promised Messiah and the beginning of a journey of hope in company with the Lord of light and life and love. Now, as that journey neared its conclusion, Jesus was being invited into a situation that would illustrate in very graphic terms the problem to which His own death would be the solution.

A torrent of grief swept over Jesus, overflowing in weeping, even though He knew what He was about to do. The Jews who witnessed His tears recognised that they were genuine and spontaneous and unlike the staged weeping of professional mourners who were commonly employed in that culture.³ The death of Lazarus was not simply a contrivance, designed as a platform upon which to reveal His glory, with Lazarus in the role of an extra. Lazarus was His friend, with whom He had enjoyed conversation and had shared meals around his table, and Jesus knew that Lazarus had experienced sorrow and sickness during his final days. Jesus' empathy with Lazarus and his sisters may have been intensified by His awareness of His own impending suffering and death, and the resulting grief that this would inflict on His own family of faith.

The Jewish leaders appeared genuinely attentive and sympathetic towards the grieving family and they recognised the deep love that Jesus had for Lazarus. The inherent contradiction seemed impossible to explain: why could Jesus, who had given the blind man his sight, not have intervened to heal Lazarus while the opportunity still existed? Of course, their question implied that they were indeed convinced that Jesus had healed the man who

¹ John 20:11-16.

² John 1:35-40, 45-46 and see footnote on John 1:18.

³ Luke 7:31-32; Mark 5:35-42.

had been blind from birth. There had also been reports of Jesus raising two young people to life soon after their deaths, but the situation with Lazarus was of a completely different order of magnitude, for he had been dead for four days. This problem was clearly beyond human solution, even for Jesus.⁴

Jesus did not attempt to correct their misconception that He had been unable to prevent Lazarus' death. He did not explain that He could have done this but had chosen not to do so, in pursuit of a higher purpose. He had told His disciples that the death of Lazarus would somehow benefit them and had indicated to Martha that these sad events would climax in a revelation of the glory of God.⁵ The Jewish leaders do not seem to have been speaking directly to Jesus, so there was no need for a verbal response; the action that He was about to take would answer their question beyond the power of words and would require them to make a suitable response to Him, one way or the other. After this there would be no room for debate or neutrality.

11:38-40 Jesus therefore, again groaning in himself, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.'

Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to him, 'Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.'

Jesus said to her, 'Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see God's glory?'

The reason for Jesus' decision to delay His journey to Bethany now became apparent. If it is impossible to restore life and health to this one man, reversing death and corruption, then the prospects for the broken creation are bleak indeed. If Jesus could restore Lazarus to life and health this would be a prophetic sign of the day when the dead will rise again in fullness of life and the whole creation will be renewed. It was for this very purpose that God had intervened in space and time in the person of Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life.

⁴ John 9:16; Luke 7:11-17; 8:49-56.

⁵ John 11:15, 40.

Pointers to this good news had occurred in former times. At the beginning of the story of redemption an elderly and childless couple, Abraham and Sarah, were chosen to initiate the process that would lead to this grand conclusion. They were faced with this same question: can God reverse what seems to be an irreversible process of physical decline? Could God restore vitality to their worn-out bodies and enable them to have a son?⁶ The same issue resurfaced just before the birth of the Messiah. An aged priest, Zechariah, and his wife Elizabeth were childless. Zechariah was interceding before God on behalf of the people of Israel, as the nation longed for God to fulfil the promise that He had made to Abraham long ago. Could God rejuvenate his and his wife's elderly bodies, enabling them to produce the forerunner of the Messiah?⁷

The two couples received positive answers in the births of their respective sons, Isaac and John. Of course, an even greater challenge faced Mary, as she was called to believe that God could create a child in her womb without the involvement of a man. Those who reject the virgin birth as impossible can have no reasonable hope for the resurrection of the dead, or the renewal of creation.⁸ As Jesus approached the tomb of Lazarus, this issue came centre stage again.

As Jesus responded to the request to 'come and see', He again experienced deep emotions, perhaps now including anger and revulsion. He was entering a scene of death, decay and despair. It portrayed in miniature the condition into which the whole creation had sunk as a consequence of the initial rebellion against the Creator. Everything that Jesus saw, especially the tomb containing the corrupting body of His dear friend Lazarus, was the very antithesis of God's good creation and His purposes for mankind.

It was no wonder that He was grieved to the point of groaning. The sight of the tomb may also have provoked thoughts of another tomb in which He Himself would soon rest in darkness, having given His life to redeem and rescue creation from its bondage to corruption. When He spoke the words that would bring

⁶ Gen. 17:15-21; Gen. 18:9-15; Gen. 21:1-7; Rom. 4:16-21; Heb. 11:11-12.

⁷ Luke 1:5-20, 57-79.

⁸ Isa. 7:14; Luke 1:26-38, 46-55; Matt. 1:18-25.

resurrection life into the body of Lazarus, He would anticipate the moment when He Himself would be raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now He gave an instruction that must have horrified the assembled crowd: 'Take away the stone.' Martha is described as the sister of the dead man, perhaps to emphasise that she was speaking on behalf of a brother who could no longer speak for himself. She protested that Lazarus was not only dead, but was now a fourth-day man. There was a common belief that the spirit tarried around the body for three days after the final breath and then, finally and irreversibly, departed. That period had now elapsed. Martha regarded this as an insurmountable problem, but it was the very purpose of Jesus' decision to delay. No one except the all-powerful Creator God could now solve it. Jesus challenged Martha to move beyond intellectual belief into committed faith, where what is theoretically possible becomes real and immediate. He reminded her of His previous question: 'Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see God's glory?'